

What Motivates Trainees?

A new study looks at the role of supervisory support and the pretraining environment.

By Debra J. Cohen

Does supervisory support play a major role in the pretraining environment at your company? How can that influence an employee's motivation to attend and participate in training?

A recent study at five midwestern organizations examined employees' motivation with regard to the pretraining environment. Researchers concentrated on how supportive supervisors were and whether employees felt training was voluntary or mandatory.

In the study, motivation toward training was defined as an employee's desire to attend, participate, learn, and transfer learning to the workplace.

The two main assumptions:

- The more supportive supervisors are of training, the more motivated employees will be toward that training.
- The more voluntary training is perceived to be, the more motivated employees will be to attend.

The pretraining environment

In addition to the variables (supervisory supportiveness and attendance norms), the pretraining environment

may encompass the following elements:

- co-workers' views on and experiences with training
- organizational training policies
- internal publicity about the training program
- credibility of the training program
- policies of the human resource department regarding attendance at training (whether it's voluntary or mandatory)
- other contextual factors.

Regardless of whether it's conducted on-site or off-site, training always takes place in an organizational context. Contextual factors such as supervisory supportiveness and attendance norms may affect training positively or negatively. For that reason, they should be controlled, or at least monitored. If they are not, they may restrain rather than facilitate training.

Adult learning theory emphasizes that adults must want to learn. If an employee's perceptions lead to a negative or apathetic attitude, then his or her desire to learn will undoubtedly be thwarted. That lack of motivation will impair learning, regardless of trainee skill level. The ramifications of such situations may be serious. An organization could spend a lot of money on training, have participants attend, and still not have them learn the necessary information.

Previous research has focused primarily on the design, content, and im-

plementation of training—factors that may not entirely account for varied outcomes in training effectiveness. Clearly, the training program is not the sole influence on an employee's motivation to attend and participate. Before the start of any training program, employees interact with each other and with the workplace.

Hypotheses Proposed by the Study

Hypothesis 1: Supervisory supportiveness will increase employees' motivation toward attending training.

Hypothesis 2: Supervisory supportiveness will increase employees' expectations of success (learning) in the training, and their expectations of the training's usefulness.

Hypothesis 3: Supervisory supportiveness will improve employees' goal perceptions.

Hypothesis 4: Perception of attendance norms will be related to motivation in that the more voluntary the training is perceived to be, the more motivated employees will be to attend.

Hypothesis 5: Employees' perceptions of training success and usefulness will increase their motivation toward training.

Hypothesis 6: Employees who set training goals will be more motivated toward training.

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The study

The study, which was conducted over a two-month period, polled a sample of 194 subjects from 14 training programs at the following:

- a research and development publications firm
- a beverage production facility
- a large hospital
- a statewide banking system
- a midsize insurance company.

The data provide the following breakdown on trainees:

- The average trainee had 2.9 years of higher education.
- Seventy-six percent of trainees had previous training in their current organizations.
- Fifty-three percent had training in other organizations.
- They had taken an average of 4.5 courses each.
- The average tenure in a trainee's current organization was 7.63 years.
- The average tenure in a trainee's current position was 2.18 years.
- The average tenure with a trainee's immediate supervisor was 2.85 years.
- More than 62 percent had super-

visory responsibilities.

Subjects completed questionnaires before the actual training. That ensured that their responses reflected the pretraining environment rather than the training program itself.

The questions focused on how trainees viewed the current training program and the two contextual factors (supportiveness of supervisors and the attendance policies).

The findings

The findings generally support the initial assumptions that employees will be more motivated if their supervisors are supportive and if they perceive attendance as voluntary rather than mandatory.

Each of the two contextual factors, supervisory support and attendance norms, is linked to motivation. A direct correlation between supervisory support and employee motivation, as proposed in Hypothesis 1, is not statistically supported. But there is evidence that an indirect relationship exists through expectancy, instrumentality, and goal perceptions.

As predicted in Hypotheses 2 and 3, employee perceptions appear to be related to motivation.

For example, it may be theorized that the subjects who lacked college degrees had less confidence in their ability to learn. In that case, the pretraining environment, in which their perceptions of supervisory support and attendance norms are formed, can be considered a major influence on their motivation. If employees' perceptions are positive, their motivation levels are likely to be high.

Hypothesis 4—that trainees will be more motivated to attend training if they feel that it is voluntary rather than mandatory—appears to be accurate.

In fact, employees in the study seemed to believe that it was the optional nature of the training that motivated them to attend.

Hypothesis 5, which postulated that employee perceptions of training success and usefulness are related to motivation, is not borne out by the findings.

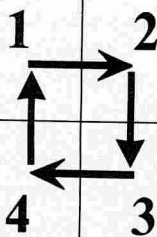
On the other hand, the positive correlation between goal perception and

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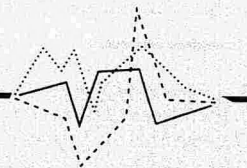
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motivation predicted by Hypothesis 6 is strongly supported. That outcome is not surprising, considering goal setting is one of the most widely practiced motivation theories.

Specifically, employees with supervisory support were more likely to set goals. And they were more likely to think about training in advance, either on their own or with the help of their supervisors.

The role of supervisors' support

Trainees were asked to judge how supportive their supervisors were. They looked at how much their supervisors encouraged them to attend training, ask questions, learn the material, and transfer what they learned to the workplace.

The findings suggest that when supervisors are supportive according

Employees can, of course, be motivated toward training in spite of no significant or direct support from their supervisors.

Some employees may participate in training to

- gain knowledge
- advance in the organization
- escape nonsupportive supervisors
- temporarily avoid particular jobs or supervisors.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, supervisors may want to channel their support in the direction of employee expectancy, instrumentality, and goal perceptions.

Here are some recommendations supervisors can follow in order to increase employees' motivation toward training:

- tie success in training to improved job performance and other benefits

Employees can be motivated in spite of no direct support from their supervisors

to those criteria, employees tend to participate in training. Also, the degree of support appears to influence how motivated an employee reports him- or herself to be.

In the study, when supervisors were supportive, employees also believed that the skills and knowledge they learned in training would help them perform better on the job and get salary increases.

Another apparent outcome is that the more supportive supervisors are, the more often employees are motivated to set training goals. And they appear to up their goal setting as motivation increases. Such behavior suggests that supervisors' support is indirectly related to motivation to set training goals.

At times, employees may appear to be motivated toward training because supervisors can direct them to training by exerting their normal authority. Such direction may not be perceived by employees as an indication of support. Employees may simply assume that supervisors expect them to participate in training as in any other job activity.

- tie reward to performance
- offer employee recognition
- ensure that employees set goals for the training
- encourage employees to think about how training relates to their jobs—before the actual training
- monitor employee perceptions of supervisor supportiveness, attendance beliefs, and motivation toward training
- encourage the organization to make training voluntary.

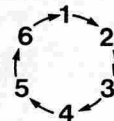
When training is voluntary, it's crucial to educate employees on why it's important for them to attend.

Implications

In addition to the practical implications for training and organizational policies, perhaps the study opens the door for further research on other factors that make up the pretraining environment.

Possibly, variables such as organizational policies and credibility can explain the variations found in training among motivation levels as well as shed more light on the general dynamics of training. ■

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